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ABSTRACT

The specific goal of language instruction at any level is to develop students' communicative abilities by increasing their awareness of necessary linguistic tools. The degree to which instructors in the English classroom are successful in attaining this specific goal is dependent on the ability of students to organize their experiences. College students, although generally capable of using all the language skills, represent many developmental levels. Instruction can assist them in developing these basic competencies to a productive level. In the classroom, several techniques can facilitate this process: students can be allowed time for the organization of thoughts before they read a selection or write a composition, discussion can be followed by a brief period of silent thought, and lectures can be paraphrased or annotated in the students' own language. Students in developmental language courses can benefit especially from an emphasis on the encouragement of higher-level cognitive operations. (KS)

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USING LANGUAGE TO ORGANIZE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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CS 203 251

Using Language to Organize Academic Experiences

One of the primary goals of education is to produce individuals who are capable of handling the affairs of the world and can lead satisfying and productive personal lives. The specific goal of language instruction at any level is to develop the students' communicative abilities by increasing their awareness of the necessary linguistic tools which are needed for free movement in the environment in which they are maturing. The degree to which instructors in the English classroom are successful in attaining this specific goal is dependent in great measure on the ability of the students to organize their experiences, first for themselves, and then for others. In this context, language plays a service role, for it is a means to an end and not an end in and of itself. It serves to organize thought that emanates from experiences. Organized thought in turn is the basis for equitable solutions to practical problems. Therefore, the core of all theoretical considerations and instructional practices, particularly in the English classroom, is language development at its most basic and pragmatic level.

Language operations are expressive and receptive. The former includes speaking and writing - the latter, listening and reading. While we have attempted to separate these operations for expediency in instruction, it is virtually impossible to develop one without a comparable development in the other. The teacher who considers himself or herself a reading teacher or a writing teacher and expects to teach these skills exclusively attempts to perform an impossible task or one with disastrous results. For reading and writing, listening and speaking are cognitive and linguistic operations innately interrelated and interchangeable in communication.

College students are capable of using all of the language skills, though

they represent a kaleidoscope of developmental levels. In order to help them experience success in all academic work, they must be provided with language experiences which allow them to be "spectators and participants"[1] to all of their experiences and reconcile the two roles in communication. Hence, our instructional procedures should focus on receptive and expressive language development regardless of our specific areas of expertise.

It must be remembered that students have done a great deal of language living before they enter college and they continue to "live" outside the realm of academe. Thus, they do not come as vessels to be filled for they are already filled to the brim with language experiences resembling a liquid so potent that it can be poured out little by little and mixed with other ingredients to make a delectable and exciting drink for all who have the pleasure of tasting it. This is a crude analogy, perhaps, but it makes the point that students already have the "stuff" which makes possible the universe of discourse. Instruction merely assists them in developing these competencies to a productive level. According to James Moffett, the school is responsible for helping students "render experience into words."[2]

Since language competence is developed in the same way that language facility is acquired, talk should be the beginning of all language experiences. Before students are asked to write a composition or read a selection, time should be allowed for an organization of thoughts. Whether the stimulus is provided by the instructor or the students, the stimulus material should be discussed in a large or small group. This allows students to ponder over what they already know about the subject, hear what others know about it and abstract from this knowledge a sound base for the assimilation of ideas.

A topic for discussion can be introduced. After a "talk" session, students can be asked to think silently for a brief time. This short silent period

provides an opportunity for personal introspection on what has been discussed. Then they can be asked to write. Most students will write about the topic just discussed, but others may move into areas of thought far removed from the immediate concern. When this happens, it reveals one of two significant situations: (1) the students have moved beyond the discussion to a new idea, or (2) the discussion did not satisfy the personal needs of these students to expand the idea. Since the object of this experience is to enable students to organize their thoughts in writing, whatever is written should be accepted. This first writing sample need not be shared, but it should be analyzed for strains of thought which might be developed into a piece of writing that can communicate ideas to others.

The importance of this activity is that it allows the development of oral aural skills in the English classroom while at the same time providing students with an opportunity to reflect upon their own thoughts and record them. This minimizes the "linguistic lag" which Vygotsky mentions is the reason that many students have difficulty with writing. According to Vygotsky, the abstract nature of the written word demands that it be preceded by a more concrete or verbal experience.[3] Students are capable of communicating orally and this is a strength which must serve as a building block for more sophisticated forms of communication.

Through language, students make a personal response to reality. James Britton has said "the world toward which our behavior is directed is the world as we symbolize it or represent it to ourselves. Changes in the actual world must be followed by changes in our representation of it if they are to affect our expectations and hence our subsequent behavior."[4] As learners, students are constantly assimilating and accommodating information to achieve what Piaget calls an "equilibrium of cognition." Therefore students' personal representations are the magnets to which all of their experiences cling and it is toward these representations that instruction must be directed.

We can begin with the academic lecture which is a "real" experience for most college students, particularly initial students. They often have difficulty adjusting to various lecture styles and, thus, are unable to record the lecture in such a way that it facilitates understanding of the content. If the task of instruction is that of helping students organize experiences, we must relate our instruction to situations in which students are actively involved. The organization of lecture notes is a case in point.

There are several methods that have been marketed commercially that are currently used to assist students with the development of this skill. These methods are insufficient, however, in that they do not lead students to an understanding of the nature of lecturing as a teaching device and its value as a means of organizing experiences. Without this basic understanding, notetaking methods become an artificial means of recording what is said so that it can be regurgitated in the form of answers to examination questions. While the lecture is not condoned as the most viable method of instruction, it is very much with us and it does have validity in some situations. More importantly, it is an excellent experience for developing the skills of organization if it is viewed from this perspective.

First, the lecture must be recognized as the instructor's organization of his own thoughts as they relate to the content. A disorganized or rambling lecture may mean that the professor's thoughts are disorganized, but it does not mean that the students must follow this example. Second, the single lecture must be seen as a part of a whole - a piece of the puzzle of what the course is all about. Third, the lecture can serve as a springboard for new ideas rather than a proclamation of what must be "true." The students should be aware of these ramifications as they listen and record, for it is their understanding which will allow personal organizations. It is the instructor's responsibility to foster this awareness.

If the students know the subject of a lecture before they attend class, this can be used as a means of predicting what the lecturer will say. The prediction can also be used as a guide in preparation reading. If the subject is not known beforehand, the students should immediately form a question out of the topic when it is given in class. They listen, then, for an answer to the question they have formed and any other information which might serve to illuminate their understanding. When a specific reason for listening is established, attentiveness is maximized.

The notebook is divided into two sections. Only one side is used to record the lecture. The other side is left for comments and questions to be used in organizing what has been said. The method of notetaking (outlining, summary etc.) is a personal matter, though it is helpful to introduce several methods so that the students can adopt one of their own. The real organization of a lecture comes after the class session when the students take the notebook and use the blank side to annotate the actual lecture. They must impose their own organization on that of the lecturer. In so doing, they base their interpretation of what has been recorded on what they already know. The lecture is thus placed in a referential context and provides a basic understanding of the course content. Questions about some points may persist. This creates a need for further discussion or reading.

The process can be taught in the English classroom through the use of taped or mini lectures. In this way, students work under the supervision of an instructor whose primary interest is content organization and assimilation rather than an accumulation of facts and their mastery. Various kinds of lectures can be given to acquaint students with different styles. Moreover, it is a means of helping students listen with a discriminating ear and organize an experience which they are sure to encounter in a college classroom.

It is a common practice in developmental language classes to ascertain

the level at which each student is performing and gear instruction toward that level. This is especially true of reading levels which are often used as determinants for all other developmental work. I question this practice in higher education. First, because grade level is a metaphor which represents a set of standards; it is not an actuality. Second, college textbooks and related materials are not selected for the grade level they represent, but for the content they contain. Most are written beyond the 13th grade level. If, according to a standardized score, a student reads proficiently at the 9th grade level, what can an instructor in a developmental course do to help him succeed in his academic work? Very little - if the student is given only 9th grade material to read. If, on the other hand, we assess his ability to handle basic reading skills and at the same time relate the student's maturity to the hierarchical stages of development, we may find that the student is applying abstract reasoning to problem situations which arise in the course of everyday experiences though he may not be aware of the process. At the same time, he can literally comprehend printed material as revealed in his 9th grade score. These are strong blocks to build upon in helping the student employ analytical thought as he attempts to read content material at the college level. The role of the instructor is that of guiding the student in the application of the same kind of reasoning that he uses out of school to his formal education. To paraphrase Vygotsky, we must aim education "not at the ripe, but at the ripening function."[5] It is not a ninth grade reading score on which we must concentrate, but rather on those capabilities formal or informal which the student already possesses and of which he must be made aware.

Vocabulary may be the greatest hurdle that the student has to overcome and vocabulary is indeed basic to higher forms of understanding. The "jargon" of a discipline, however, can be understood if it is related to the student's experiences.

It must be recognized that all disciplines are pertinent to practical situations. Have the student rewrite difficult passages in "laymen's language" or have him give a "laymen's lecture" on what he has read. A"laymen's lecture" is one which contains all the facts without the formal lexicon of a discipline. Allow opportunities for the student to talk with other students about common areas of misunderstanding and encourage him to organize his thoughts through writing. The dynamic relation of thought to word will be recognized much more quickly if the student uses all of the language operations in the process. Language skills will be developed, as Andrew Wilkinson suggests, "in situations where they are called upon and not by special training in them."[6] We can start "not with the skill to be taught, but with the central experience upon which the skills may operate." What appeared at first to be a reading problem reflects only a need for further language development and an emphasis on higher level cognitive operations. This kind of development can be enhanced if we concentrate on the strengths that a student possesses instead of the deficiencies our tests indicate.

Students in developmental courses are seeking improved interpretations of reality. They may be handicapped by past educational experiences, but they are not bound by them. One of the strong tenets of George Kelly's theory is that "no one is a captive of his own biography"[7] because he is free to reconstrue reality as he predicts and validates experiences. If instructors can believe this, they will be freed of the temptation to label students and assign them to positions of "remedial,""non-traditional" or "college level." They can be viewed as a bank of their own experiences. The process of depositing into and withdrawing from this bank is what language learning is all about. Language instruction serves the purpose of providing an expedient way of completing deposit and withdrawal slips and handling all other functions which make banking

possible. As efficiency is needed in the business world, so it is with language development. The more sophisticated our processes become, the more stable and valuable are the results.

Notes

[1]James Britton. Language and Learning (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1972)., p.97.

[2]James Moffett. Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968)., p.14.

[3]Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. Thought and Language trans. by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1962)., p.99

[4]James Britton. op. cit., p.14.

[5]Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. op.cit., p.104.

[6]Andrew Wilkinson. "Oracy in English Teaching" in Johanna S. deStefano and Sharon E. Fox. Language and the Language Arts (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974)., p.65

[7]George A. Kelly. A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963)., p.15.